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ABSTRACT

The Willow Creek School Division in southern Alberta (Canada) invited leaders of various community agencies to serve on a task force to examine how changes in the local society were affecting children. The division serves approximately 2,700 rural-based students in several small rural communities. The task force was composed of the leaders of a variety of social, health, and police services, together with teachers, administrators, an official of the Alberta provincial education authority, and a member of the Board of Trustees. The task force surveyed teachers about students presenting or encountering major difficulties in school. The survey asked for a description of the problems, any in-school or community assistance being received by the student, and services needed by the student. A focus group of 12 secondary students answered questions pertaining to life at school or related to school. Although the focus-group exercise was deemed unsuccessful, it revealed that students perceived their lives as boring and enjoyed classes where participative methods of teaching were employed. Community agencies presented descriptions of their mandates and activities. The task force developed and disseminated a directory of social, psychological, health, and police services in the area. They also sent recommendations to the Board of the School Division. Although greater awareness and communication among agencies was accomplished, coordination of services remains a goal. (KS)

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HARNESSING THE COMMUNITY

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ABSTRACT

This project was conducted in conjunction with the Willow Creek School Division in southern Alberta. The Division serves about 2700 rural students. The School Division recognized that the range of student needs for non-educational services was increasing. Many of these needs arose from conditions in the community. The purpose of the project was to generate data on these issues from the literature, students, teachers and service providers and feed the information to a Task Force. The Task Force would then attempt to negotiate with service providers to exchange information and cooperate with each other and with the schools to serve the needs of the children and their families. The paper deals with the processes followed and the successes and failures of the project.

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HARNESSING THE COMMUNITY

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The Issue

In recent years, school administrators have noticed that children have an increasing number of social and personal problems which impact on their ability to succeed in school. Often, the conflicts in children's lives manifest themselves in schools in terms of inappropriate behaviour, lack of motivation to learn, delinquency, and dropping out.[1] A review of the literature indicates that shifts in values, family structures, interaction within families, peer values, the economic structure of society, the labour market, the relationship between education and employment to be important extrinsic factors which have had negative impacts on children and their motivation and ability to succeed at school.[2] In addition the literature notes in-school factors which also impede student motivation and learning.[3]

On the other hand there is ample evidence that there are many factors within schools which impede student learning. Typically students cite boredom in school as a major cause for lack of achievement and for dropping out. The boredom emanates in part from the disjuncture between school and what is "real" in the students' lives, such as social structure, employment and interpersonal relationships.[4] It also is due in part to inadequate curricula and poor teaching. By poor teaching is meant

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[1]Peter McLaren (1993) *Schooling as Ritual Performance*. Second Edition. New York: Routledge.

[2]Phillip Schlechty (1991). *Schools for the 21st Century*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

[3] David Stern, James Catterall, Charlotte Alhadeff and Maureen Ash. (1986). *Reducing the high school drop-out rate in California*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Institute of Government Studies.

[4]See McLaren.

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the inability of some teachers to match their materials to the learning styles and characteristics and lives of their students.[5]

The Setting

Teachers and administrators of the Willow Creek School Division in Southern Alberta wished to deal with the above issues. The Division serves approximately 2700 rural-based students in elementary and secondary schools located in several small rural communities which serve the surrounding agricultural region. Their purpose was to examine the extent of the problems of the children in their schools and to determine ways of bringing non-educational community services into the school to assist.

To this end, the School Division invited the leaders of various community agencies to serve on a Task Force to examine how changes in the local society were affecting children in the schools. The second purpose was to encourage greater cooperation among agencies and between the agencies and the schools.

The Process

Beginning in the early Spring of 1991, the Superintendent of the Division began discussions with members of the Department of Educational Policy and Administrative Studies at the University of Calgary about the issues facing his schools. Three professors agreed to take on the project with the School Division. They served as group facilitators, data gatherers and analysts (but not necessarily interpreters).

At the same time, the Division created a Task Force composed of the leaders of a variety of social, health and police services, together with teachers, administrators, an Alberta Education official, and a member of the Board of Trustees. Agencies represented on the Task Force included: Alberta Education, Alberta Family and Social Services, two local Health Units, Alberta Mental Health, and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. From time to time representatives of hospitals and other agencies made contributions to the meetings of the Task Force. One agency that did not participate was the Alberta Alcohol and Drug Addiction Commission.

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[5]G. Wehlage and R. A. Rutter (1986). Dropping out: how much do schools contribute to the problem? in *School Drop-outs: Patterns and Policies*. New York:Teachers College Press, pp. 70-88.

The Task Force examined its mandate and proposed the following statement of goals:

1. to create delivery systems which better serve the needs of all students within a positive learning environment;
2. to liaise with other community agencies and develop an interagency response system for dealing with student-related needs and problems; and
3. to promote communication, trust, harmony, celebration of achievements, and tolerance between all stakeholders.[6]

The Definition of Student Needs

There were three sources for the definition of children's needs: the review of literature which is summarized in part in the introduction to this report, a survey of teachers and a secondary school student focus group.

The Teacher Survey. All teachers in the School Division were asked to select several students in their classes who were presenting major problems or who were encountering major difficulties. Students with minor difficulties were to be excluded.

For each child so identified, the teacher was asked to respond to the following:

A. **Describe the behaviours or indications of problems which you have observed in this student.**

B. **Describe briefly the in-school assistance that this student has received (i.e. what action have you or other school personnel taken on this student's behalf).**

C. **Describe any types of assistance that you are aware of which this student and his-her family have received from community agencies.**

D. **What other assistance, in your opinion, should be given to this student and/or the family?**

E. **What support and/or assistance do you feel would benefit <u>you</u> and enable you to work more effectively in helping this student?**

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[6]These were the goals. Obviously not all would be met fully. The Task Force concentrated its time on dealing with goals 2 and 3.

In the survey, teachers identified 223 students. Some teachers identified more than one child. The proportion of students with serious difficulties is similar to that reported in other studies. Of those identified, almost 40% were 10 years of age or less (ECS to grade 3). The next largest group were aged 12 to 14. However, 1/3 of the children of the children with the most serious difficulties were in the 12-14 group.

Most of the children identified are said to have multiple problems. Learning, social and emotional problems tend to be found together. This finding suggests that multi-disciplinary and multi-agency teams are required to assist the children. Reading and communication difficulties are the most common learning problems which were identified. Two thirds of the children identified were said to have severe learning difficulties but only twenty-five per cent were considered to have severe reading problems.

Two thirds of these children were described as having social and behavioral problems and almost half were described as engaging in fighting and other aggressive hostile behaviours. These children typically dislike teachers and school.

Almost one fifth of these students were had family problems and these were almost invariably associated with emotional problems. Forty students were observed to be suffering from some form of abuse ranging from alcohol, drug, physical, emotional or sexual abuse. Only 11 physically handicapped children were identified as having serious problems at school.

The youngest children (ECS to grade 6) were identified has having the most serious psychological problems whereas the junior high school students have the most social and behavioral problems.

In-school assistance came form individual teachers, resource rooms and the School Division's psychological services. As far as the teachers knew, only about 35 children who were receiving assistance from local social or health agencies.

When teachers made recommendations for further services, they asked for additional in-house services (counselling and special education) and the provision of family counselling services.

The Secondary School Student Focus Group. Focus groups have been used increasingly for evaluation research and for marketing purposes. A focus group is comprised of approximately 12 people who, under the direction of a facilitator, discuss their personal reactions to the topic of discussion, in this case life in the high school.

Focus groups have typically been composed of adults. A review of the literature has revealed no prior studies of groups composed of students. Neither has there been any reported educational research using focus groups. Focus groups are non-threatening. Each member of the group is considered to have as much expertise as any other member. Any member of the group can contribute. Other members of the group can react (agree or disagree or present additional information). What they say and how they say it informs the sponsors (in this case the Task Force) of students' reactions to what is happening in schools and in the community. An examination of the methodolcgy of Focus Groups and its success in other settings suggested that it would be suitable for our purposes.

Twelve secondary students, three randomly selected from each of the four secondary schools in the Division, were brought together under the guidance of Dr. L. Bosetti. The session was tape-recorded and was observed by other Faculty members and a group of graduate students. The group was directed to consider seven questions:

1. What is the life of a teenager like in the area where you live?

2. What is it like to be a student in your school?

3. What factors in your life (family, relationships, peer, environment, peers) influence your success, failure and motivation at school?

4. If you had the power, what would you do to change your school to make it a better place to be and to learn in?

5. Tell me what you do in school? what you learn in school?

6. What do you feel the future has in store for you?

7. What supports do you have in your life? What dangers for you face?

This exercise was not successful. The twelve students, aged 14-18, from grades 10 to 12 and from 4 different schools, were very reserved. The group dynamics never did kick in. Follow-up focus groups composed of students from single grade levels and from single schools were planned but did not take place.

Nevertheless, the information garnered from these students confirmed much of what was in the literature. The critical factor in these young peoples' lives was boredom. They were of the opinion that there were few facilities, activities, or jobs for teenagers in these small towns. A few children from farms cited that they had chores, but little or no recreational activities. Boredom lead to

misbehaviour, vandalism, and "smash" parties. The best entertainment was in the nearest city of any size, Lethbridge. When they left school, they hoped to go to a city for a job or to attend college.

Even at school, the highlights consisted of the opportunity to socialize with friends, and for some, physical education classes and the various team sports.

They spent their study time on the subjects they considered most important: English, mathematics and science.

They most enjoyed the classes where the teachers enjoyed their work and taught enthusiastically. The best teachers used p participative methods of teaching. Students appreciated small classes and one-on-one attentîon, peer tutoring.

Making money was not a major problem for students. They appreciate money for short term uses (car, gas, entertainment) but most would not quit school for a good paying job.

The students made many suggestions to improve schools, including improved teaching, active and participative teaching methods, more opportunity for social activities, less competition and rivalry (which leads to fighting and hate), more optional courses, and better quality facilities (lounges, paint to brighten up classrooms).

ROLES OF COMMUNITY AGENCIES

Representatives from the various community agencies were invited to present to the Task Force their mandates and descriptions of their activities. At the same time, the members of the Task Force considered the data from teachers and students that were presented by the Faculty of Education staff. These activities took place at meeting scheduled for a few hours on an afternoon one or two months apart.

Reviewing the materials from the schools gave the agencies a better appreciation of the needs of the community from a school perspective. Meeting together on the relatively neutral grounds of the School Division offices allowed the agency representatives to discuss common problems and to advocate the merits of interagency cooperation or at least cooperation with the schools. However, agencies were reluctant to change their current mode of operations, citing provincial regulations and the lack of staff and resources. One agency that was prepared to cooperate more fully with the schools, and did in fact improve in that regard, were the local detachments of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police.

About mid-way through the project a proposal was made to create an inter-agency office for the County, however the proposal did not receive funding.

Creating a directory. One tangible result of the work with agencies was the development and dissemination of a directory of all social, psychological, health and police services in the area served by the School Division. Several key agencies in Lethbridge and Calgary were also listed.

The directory listed:

- Crisis hotlines for children, teens, families
- All police units
- Probation officers, court and correction services
- Hospitals, treatment centres, health units
- family and social agencies
- Mental health organizations
- Counselling services
- Alcohol and Drug Abuse centres and hotlines
- Emergency centres
- Child abuse units and hotlines
- Emergency shelters for youth and families
- Native Assistance Agencies
- Career and Employment agencies.

Each entry lists addresses, the name of contact persons, telephone numbers and other pertinent information. There are 103 entries in the directory.

The Directory is available from schools and from the School Division offices.

Task Force Recommendations

As the Task Force was a creation of the Board of the School Division, all recommendations were directed to the Board. The recommendations are divided into three groups.

1. **It is recommended that the Board establish a Coordinating Committee consisting of representatives of various community agencies and the School Division. It is also recommended that the Coordinating Committee quickly establish the terms of reference including membership objectives and funding for the Interagency Coordinating Committee to perform the following tasks:**

   a) to facilitate the planning and coordination of community and educational services which will meet the needs of students in the Division, particularly those students who face significant impediments in attaining personal and educational success in the schools;

b) to encourage and discover innovative means for the coordination of community and educational services to meet the needs of students;

c) to recommend to the Board and to the community agencies specific programs and practices that will enhance services to students;

d) to monitor progress in the areas of concern to the community and to report periodically to the Board.

2. It is recommended that the Board make a commitment to enhance services and programs which provide for the educational needs of young people who face significant impediments in attaining personal and educational success in schools. These services and programs shall include but not be limited to:

a) the provision of teacher inservice activities to meet the needs of children who are identified as having such impediments;

b) the continuation and development of alternative programs for students who are having difficulties achieving success in the regular school programs;

c) the development of special services and programs at the secondary school level for students assuming responsibilities that are recognized as adult in nature, for example, the assumption of significant family responsibilities;

d) the provision of operational time which will permit the bringing together of teachers and other service providers for case conferences and inservice education;

e) the acquisition by the Division Media Centre of materials that will support the work of the Interagency Coordinating Committee and the work of teachers in providing for students with special needs.

3. It is recommended that schools in the Division inform students of the existing young peoples' "Hot Lines" and to clearly post these telephone numbers within the schools and in their communication materials.

Conclusion

The study indicates that a high proportion of students in our school systems, including rural school divisions, have social and emotional problems which infringe upon their abilities to learn. The sources of these problems are personal, family-based, community-based and school-based.

Both community and school resources are necessary to ameliorate these problems. To date the efficacy of these resources have been restricted by lacks of communication and coordination. this project did bring out these issues rather starkly for this community. The project, in addition to sensitising the community to the type and extent of problems, encouraged greater communication between agencies. Coordination of services, however, is still a sought-after dream.